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ABSTRACT

Children's ability to infer dominant or subordinate status of speakers from their requests was investigated. It was hypothesized that, for young children, syntactic indirectness, semantic softness, and a positive tone, in the absence of other cues, would serve as cues to indicate that a speaker is subordinate to a listener. Syntactic directness, semantic aggravators, and negative tone were hypothesized as cues of a speaker's dominance. Syntactic directness/indirectness, semantic markers, and tone of voice were identified as cues which signify status to a listener. Syntactic directness/indirectness measures how explicitly sentence structure indicates a request is being made, semantic markers involve words such as "please" or a threat, and tone of voice was used to differentiate between pleasant and aggressive requests. Sixteen 4 1/2- to 5-year-old boys and girls and sixteen 5 1/2- to 6-year-old boys and girls listened to eight pairs of stimulus sentences, each pair differing solely with respect to one of the hypothesized cues. One request in the pair was "directed" to each child by a doll while the other request in the pair was "addressed" to the child by an identical doll. After each pair of sentences, the child had to decide which doll was making requests "in a bossier way." In general, hypotheses were confirmed. (Author/DB/PW)

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Preschoolers' judgments of speaker
status based on requests

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Even for very young children, requests form a large part of early language and help get things done with the help of other children and adults. The results of laboratory and observational studies have shown that children produce and comprehend a wide range of request forms by the time they are five or six years old. Furthermore, children's distribution of these different forms in conversation is systematically related to a number of contextual factors, one of which (and the one most thoroughly researched) is the relative status of speaker and listener. Just as adults do, children tend to use requests that have a particular set of characteristics with listeners of higher status than they are and requests that have a different set of characteristics with listeners of lower status. (I should mention that, while relative status has been the major independent variable investigated, other variables such as familiarity affect children's use of requests. The generalizations I will discuss today tend to hold true when these other variables are held constant.)

There are three characteristics which differentiate request forms to higher status listeners from request forms to lower status listeners: syntactic directness, semantic markers, and tone of voice. Children use these two types of request forms to differentiate adult from child listeners, fathers from mothers, dominant from less dominant peers, and a variety of status-linked roles such as doctor and nurse and teacher and pupil. (For a review of this literature, see Becker, in press.)

Syntactic directness, as described by Ervin-Tripp, is a measure of how explicitly the structure of the sentence indicates that it is a request and what that request is. Children tend to use more indirect forms like the question Have any pencils? with higher status listeners and more direct forms like the imperative Gimme a pencil with lower status listeners.

The presence of semantic markers also differentiates the two groups of request forms. Semantic markers are words or phrases which change the meaning of a request and that can't be described syntactically. Requests to higher status listeners tend to include semantic softeners like please, reasons for the request, and promises like If you give me that, I'll give you this. Requests to lower status listeners, in contrast, tend to include semantic aggravators like threats and profanity. Similarly, tone differentiates the two groups of requests: requests to higher status listeners tend to have a soft, positive tone while requests to lower status listeners tend to have a more negative, aggressive tone.

The top of page 1 of your hand-out summarizes the typical characteristics of children's requests to higher and lower status listeners.

Given that the distribution of these requests is so systematic and predictable, it seemed reasonable to propose that syntactic directness, semantic softeners and aggravators, and tone of voice might serve as cues for dominance and submissiveness. These cues could be used to infer actual or assumed status. Assumed status was operationalized as the nuances of bossiness and niceness.

Children's ability to infer social information from requests has not previously been investigated. I hypothesized that, for young children, syntactic indirectness, semantic softeners, and a positive, submissive tone, in the absence of other information, might serve as cues that the speaker is or is pretending to be of lower status. Syntactic directness, semantic aggravators, and a negative, aggressive tone might serve as cues for dominance. I used 2 response measures to investigate my hypotheses.

16 middle-class boys and girls between the ages of 4 and 4½ years and 16 boys and girls between the ages of 5½ and 6 years participated in the study. I constructed 8 pairs of stimulus sentences, each pair differing solely with respect to one of the hypothesized cues for status. One request in the pair was addressed to the child by one boy doll while the other request in the pair was addressed by a second, identical doll. After each pair, the child had to decide which doll was asking in a bossier way.

As you can see on the bottom of p. 1 of your hand-out, the hypothesized cues did provide information to the children about status, although there was a significant effect of age on children's ability to use some of the cues. While a significant proportion of 5 year olds responded as predicted to each of the stimulus pairs, the 4 year olds did so on only three of eight. Four year olds performed at chance level on the other five pairs. Let's examine these three pairs more closely. Two represent extreme contrasts of tone and syntactic directness. The third is not substantially different from the rest and may be just one conventionalized form they have picked up. The other pairs of requests contrast to a lesser extent or represent knowledge of specific, conventional usage they have not yet acquired. The superior performance of the older children is probably due to their greater experience with a range of requests used in a variety of situations. This, combined with greater cognitive abilities, provides 5 year olds with richer, more general knowledge and enables them to draw inferences to novel social domains. The knowledge of the 4 year olds is less extensive and less open to generalization, so their performance is not as good or consistent.

It appears that tone, semantic markers, and syntactic directness can function for 4 and 5 year olds as cues to a speaker's relative status, but that 4 year olds are only reliably able to use extreme different examples of these cues. In other words, young children identify requests as bossy when they are similar to requests that would typically be addressed by a higher status speaker to a lower status listener, but are in fact addressed by a speaker to a "peer."

In order to assess whether children have expectations about how the three characteristics of requests are used by speakers of different statuses, the same 32 children participated in a second task. In this task each child heard 20 requests, presumably spoken by dolls inside a closed box. The requests varied in tone, semantic markers, and syntactic directness. After each request, the box was opened and the child had to decide whether the request had been spoken by a toddler, peer, or man doll in the box. The table on the top of p. 2 of your hand-out summarizes the

results of this task. Again, tone was the best cue for relative status, having a significant effect on the responses of both the 4 and 5 year olds. For example, when children heard the request, MISS JONES, GIVE ME A SANDWICH! they tended to attribute it to a higher status speaker (say, the man) and to attribute Miss Jones, give me a sandwich to a lower status speaker like the toddler.

Similarly, both age groups attributed syntactically direct requests to speakers of higher status than the speakers to whom they attributed the more indirect requests. For example, when they heard the direct imperative Give me a sandwich they might have attributed it to the man, and when they heard the less direct permission directive May I have a sandwich they attributed it to a lower status speaker, the toddler.

Comparisons involving semantic markers are also consistent with my predictions. For example, a request with the softener please was attributed to lower status speakers than the speakers to whom children attributed the same request without any markers. Also, requests with the general forms Can I and I need were attributed to higher status speakers than the speakers of requests with the polite forms May I and I would like.

Overall, it appears that 4 and 5 year olds do have expectations about the characteristics of requests typically used by lower and higher status speakers. Their expectations are consistent with my predictions as well as with the actual distribution of request forms in normal conversation.

Children's definitions of bossiness provide an unexpected source of data in support of my hypothesis. Before each child began the two tasks, I asked him or her to tell me "what it means when someone is bossy" in order to ensure that children understood this term. Many children spontaneously mentioned language in their definitions and said something more specific than simply that a bossy person "bosses you around." The best definition came from the 5 year old who said that her father was bossy. "One day," she explained, "they went to a party and my dad said. 'Let's go home.' My mom wanted to stay, but they went home."

The results of this work indicate that children as young as 4 years are able to use linguistic characteristics of requests, in the absence of other information, to make inferences about the actual or assumed status of speakers. Children's knowledge of requests should aid them in producing and responding to requests appropriately. Their inferential abilities also allow them to deviate strategically from expected usage to convey challenges, sarcasm, and other social nuances. This work demonstrates that preschoolers have at least the rudimentary skills and knowledge that would enable them to do so.

Besides being of interest to those studying pragmatic development, I think my findings have implications for human ethologists. Ethologists should begin to attend more to children's language, since it appears that subtle aspects of language usage relate importantly to social structure and social interaction.

Reference

Becker, Judith. Children's strategic use of requests to mark and manipulate social status. In S. Kuczaj (Ed.), Language development: Language, thought and culture. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, in press.

Characteristics of Requests

To higher status listeners

syntactically indirect
(e.g., Have any books?)
semantic softeners
soft, positive tone

Hypothesis:
these are cues for lower status of
speaker

To lower status listeners

syntactically direct
(e.g., Gimme a book)
semantic aggravators
negative, aggressive tone

Hypothesis:
these are cues for dominance of
speaker

Proportion of children responding as predicted

	<u>4 year olds</u>	<u>5 year olds</u>
<u>Contrast of tone</u>		
GIVE ME A PENNY!	.94**	1.00**
Give me a penny		
<u>Contrasts of syntactic directness</u>		
Gimme a penny.	.75*	.94**
I really like pennies.		
I need a penny.		
May I have a penny?	n.s.	1.00**
Will you give me some pennies?		
Do you have any pennies left?	n.s.	.81*
<u>Contrasts of semantic markers</u>		
I want a penny.	.81*	1.00**
I would like a penny.		
Give me a penny.		
Give me a penny please.	n.s.	1.00**
(First name), give me a penny.		
(Mr./Miss last name), give me a penny.	n.s.	.81*
Can I have a penny?		
May I have a penny?	n.s.	.75*

χ^2 : * = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .001$

Attributions of statuses of request speakers

<u>Comparisons of tone</u>	
Negative and aggressive	> Positive and submissive
<u>Comparisons of syntactic directness</u>	
More direct (e.g., <u>Give me a . . .</u>)	> Less direct (e.g., <u>May I have a . . .</u>)
<u>Comparisons of semantic markers</u>	
No markers (e.g., <u>Give me a . . .</u>)	> Semantic softener (e.g., <u>Give me a . . . please</u>)
General form (e.g., <u>Can I have a . . .</u>)	> Polite form (e.g., <u>May I have a . . .</u>)
(e.g., <u>I need a . . .</u>)	(e.g., <u>I would like a . . .</u>)

Requests used as stimuli in study 2

I want a sandwich.
 (First name), give me a sandwich.
 Can I have a sandwich?
 Hey, you have a sandwich.
 Will you give me a sandwich?
 Give me a sandwich.
 Miss/Mr. (Last name), give me a sandwich.
 If you give me a sandwich, I'll be your best friend.
 Give me a sandwich, please.
 MISS/MR. (LAST NAME), GIVE ME A SANDWICH!
 May I have a sandwich?
 Time for lunch.
 I would like a sandwich.
 Do you have any sandwiches left?
 Is that a sandwich you have there?
 Can you give me a sandwich?
 I really like sandwiches.
 I need a sandwich.
 GIVE ME A SANDWICH!
 If you don't give me a sandwich, I'll hit you.